

Leo Thi Chai - 5 Years of Progress



Son La Province is breathtakingly beautiful country. Remote villages peek out from rugged and lush green mountains of northwestern Vietnam. On a seemingly impossible terrain, families work hard to make a living. Farming, vegetable hawking, raising animals, brick making, and weaving are common trades in the villages of Son La. In this setting, we met Leo Thi Chai, an amputee, a mother, and a remarkable individual.



Leo was a young girl with a promising future. Nineteen years old, trained as a nurse in a district hospital, and newly married, Leo lost her leg in a traffic accident. In that moment she thought her life was changed forever. Having to rely on crutches for mobility, Leo could no longer perform nurse's duties and sadly resigned from her nursing job, which she loved. For 6 months after her accident, Leo felt embarrassed about her amputation, and hopeless about her future. Adding to her despair, her husband's family now felt that she was damaged, useless as a wife and incapable of being a mother.

POF first met Leo Thi Chai in 2002 when Doctors Gondring and Scranton performed an amputation revision for her at Thai Nguyen with the AOFAS surgical project. Since her revision, POF has fitted her with 2 prostheses, most recently in June of 2006.

In 2006 when we visited Miss Leo at her home in Mai Son district we were greeted by a young woman with radiant smile. She was positively beaming. Smiling from ear to ear, she welcomed us into her small home and told us proudly that she is a new mother.



Leo said that since she received her prosthesis, she finally feels normal again. She said she feels like she can do anything she wants to do. She wants to return to nursing, but she's not sure if the hospital will accept her. Is she comfortable enough with her prosthesis? Does she think she can perform all of the necessary tasks for nursing? She smiles quietly for a moment, before answering.

She had just spent 9 months of pregnancy on her prosthesis. Every day of those 9 months, she was working in the field, harvesting and drying vegetables up until the day that she birthed her child.

When the labor contractions started, late at night, she was alone in the house. Although in-laws were on the way, they were coming from a very remote, mountainous area and would not arrive in time to assist with the delivery. Remembering her nursing training, Leo arranged her small home and prepared to deliver the child on her own. By the time her in-laws arrived, she had delivered a healthy baby girl (a breech birth!!) and was resting with the baby.

Today she easily carries around her 3-year-old son and works at the family farm doing all kinds of chores. If the rice fields are dry and flat she can work there to help the family. Mostly she takes care of the chickens and pigs.



On my first trip to Vietnam with POF, I thought that the patient stories would be about the prostheses, about men and woman returning to normal life because of the new limb regained lost mobility. But now I realize that the real stories are the people themselves. The limbs are important vehicles, but it is the spirit of the individuals that put the limbs into motion.

